

ON INDETERMINACY. HEGEL, WOMEN, AND UNFIXED NARRATIVES

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Abstract. *In this article, we present an interpretation of the literary writing concerned with the limits of the French Revolution – conveying the political, cultural, and social contradictions of the era – in contrast with the more traditional philosophical mode of exposition inherited from the 18th century. To this end, we propose a non-Hegelian interpretation of Hegel's notion of indeterminacy (Bestimmungslosigkeit) as an analytical tool for critiquing a limited understanding of freedom. We connect this critique to Jean Copjec's analysis of Fixierarbeit, positioning it in opposition to a more expansive notion of freedom aligned with the concept of Haftbarkeit. To further explore this distinction regarding the possibilities of emancipatory narratives, we examine the writings of Mme. de Staël as primary reference points, while also drawing on other significant works of the period, including those of Mme. de Duras and Olympe de Gouges.*

Keywords. *Indeterminacy; Freedom; Literature; Narratives; History; Politics*

One of the main contemporary critiques of the Hegelian philosophy of history concerns how, in different narrative contexts, it logically makes it impossible to represent the relative autonomy of political and cultural experiences that exceed the logically pre-established borders of World History: A problem particularly referred (but not just) to African and Latin American history. The coloniality of the Hegelian philosophy of history has less to do with a specific limitation concerning the documents or archives available

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at the time in which Hegel wrote but with the neglect of really existing documentation of the Hegelian cultural context. That is to say, it is not an exogenous requirement, but rather an endogenous contraction of the philosophy of history that puts the logical necessity of the system before the autonomy of specialized studies – not of our time, but of his own. This is undoubtedly true for a long sequence of topics such as Arabic writing, Caribbean politics, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and the political history of Latin American independence within an inevitable etcetera that makes the validity and representativeness of Hegel's philosophy of history untenable in the eyes of its contemporary readers. This problem is especially evident, for example, from the perspective of Humboldt, for whom Hegelian world history represents a «dry theoretical assertion of completely false facts and views about America and the Indian world» that cannot but suppose an «enslaving [*freiheitraubend*] and oppressive [*beängstigend*]» understanding of reality¹. Statements like these proliferated between the 1820s and 1830s, when specialized studies rejected the form and content of the Hegelian proposal highlighting the lack of a documentary perspective appropriate to the problems that it proposes to raise – so the problem is not only what Hegel does not say, but the assertion of what he writes².

Coloniality is paradigmatic in this regard, but it is not the only case of a fundamental «libidinal repression required by Civilization», as Jean W. Scott puts it³. The debates on the place of women in World History partly follow an analogous trail, interrogating not just the narrative context but the Hegelian philosophical approach

¹ A. von Humboldt, *Briefe von Humboldt an Varnhagen von Ense aus den Jahren 1827 bis 1858*, ed. by L. Assing, Leipzig, Brockhaus, 1860⁴, p. 44.

² Cfr. A. Narváez, *The Silenced Revolution. On Hegel, Language, and Black Jacobinism*, «Intersezioni. Rivista di Storia delle Idee», XLIV (3), 2024, pp. 405-423; Id., *Wahnsinn oder Revolution? Die (koloniale) Vieldeutigkeit des Freiheitsbegriffs in Hegels Weltgeschichte*, in *Selbstbestimmung. Studien zu Hegels Theorie der Freiheit*, ed. by E. Rózsa, P. Pulgar Moya, A. Manchisi and T. Meyer, Basel, Fink, pp. 351-370.

³ J. Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2017, p. 21.

itself. Carla Lonzi proposed the most radical and least vague position on the matter, for if the spirit of the *Phenomenology* represents the patriarchal spirit that relegates female work and existence (her *Dasein*, so to speak) to a primitive subordinate dimension as «a hypothesis formulated by others»⁴, the only further position possible is deliberate rejection. The inverse approach to Lonzi's argument logically rests on the relative autonomy that the figure of Antigone has in the *Phenomenology*, where Hegel suggests a kind of radical inflection that, nevertheless, can only stand on the ground of the symbolic reference to the law, or the feminine *nature* of ethical disobedience. Either way, both approaches to Hegel's reading of Antigone are possible due to a logical subordination of the argument to a wider and reluctant interpretative framework⁵. However, is it possible to read Hegel *despite* Hegel – or to read Hegel *against* Hegel?

Our purpose here could be considered as a position between rejection and reinterpretation; for our primary aim is not to fully reject Hegel's philosophy due to the absence of women as a political subject in history (which would be a problem of *philosophy on demand*), nor to reinterpret some aspects of his philosophy in order to

⁴ C. Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti*, Milano, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1970.

⁵ Of course, the problem can be posed in a totally different way. If on the one hand «Hegel doesn't set out specific political ideals that share ground with feminism, except perhaps insofar as he saw the idea of self-determination as the key motif of modernity», an idea that agrees also with the interpretations associated with the critique of the racialization of modernity proposed by Fanon, on the other Hegelian philosophy offers suggestive glimpses for the genealogical reconstruction of the critique of modernity, for «in many ways more explicitly than Marx, it seems that Hegel shows how the realm of productive labor, property, and exchange depends on the realm of reproductive labor and care, and how the latter needs to be defined as a noneconomic sphere in order for the whole thing to work. I take seriously Hegel's claim not to be arguing for this as what *ought* to be, but rather as extrapolating the logic of what *is*». K. Hutchings et al., *Debating Hegel's Legacy for Contemporary Feminist Politics*, in *Hegel's Philosophy and Feminist Thought. Beyond Antigone?*, ed. by K. Hutchings and T. Pulkkinen, New York, Palgrave, 2010, p. 235.

logically *correct* the actually existing writings (as a sort of late *plusquamhegelianism*), but to use the specific notion of indeterminacy (*Bestimmungslosigkeit*) as a narrative scope of French women's revolutionary movement despite Hegel's interpretation of politics, freedom and women. In doing so, we could talk of a non-Hegelian reading of the Hegelian indeterminacy. What we propose in the following pages is a narrative approach to the categorical absence of women as a specific political subject, differentiated from the hypothetically universal neutrality of the German *Mensch* and the French *Homme*, these last being more representative of a restricted and arbitrary universal frame for politics than of a wide conceptualization of revolutionary present in its own time, for as Copjek says «the notion of a universal humanity stands outside and domesticates history, making the latter the agent of merely minor variations on its already decided script»⁶. Our interest, however, does not lie in arguing why women do not appear as political subjects in Hegelian philosophy, but rather in narrating how women's writings during the long French revolutionary process represent a specific notion of critique that unveils the arbitrary limits of universality.

In the lectures on the philosophy of world history, Hegel says that transformation (*Veränderung*) has a particular characteristic in nature, which lies in the repetition that takes place as a cycle; nevertheless, when this transformation occurs in the spiritual world, it is no longer a passive dimension but an activity, a «wirkliche Veränderungsfähigkeit» that realizes a tendency towards the best as a drive for perfectibility («Trieb der *Perfektibilität*»). Being fair, the first line of the argument distinguishes World History, at least nominally, from any cyclical and teleological interpretation of history, as if it had a natural movement towards a specific and providential purpose; yet the problem is not there but in the translation that the *Veränderungsfähigkeit* makes of the drive of perfectibility. Historical activity produces senses, names and signs that signify a tendency, which is best considered as a mediation that strains the formal right to the repetition of the natural cycle, i.e., it expresses the flip side of

⁶ J. Copjek, *Imagine There's no Woman: Ethics and Sublimation*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 2002, p. 93.

the process in which resistance and narratives are inscribed. For this reason, Hegel makes explicit in this context that states and religions have the right to disregard the concrete meaning of the *Veränderungsfähigkeit* that breaks into and against the apparently natural cycle⁷. That said, we could understand the *Trieb* both as a drive and an impulse of what Hegel refers to as the ambiguity (*Vielseitigkeit*) of freedom. Thus, it seems possible to interpret indeterminacy as a recognition of the relative autonomy of the processes (discourses, practices, etc.) of diverse emancipatory experiences concerning the social reality in which they are woven: Trajectories with particular tensions, motives, styles, and narratives, that do not depend on a fixed present, but rather on the production of a complexity of senses that disrupts reality. The Catholic Church and the French state, as Hegel says, are historical examples of resistance to the disruptive transformation of the Reformation and the Revolution – that is, Counter-Reform and Restoration as real and concrete rights to conservation and, therefore, of reactionary powers to emerge and to act *as they are*. These are examples, as Hutchings asserts, of taking seriously Hegel's claim to represent reality as it is and not as it ought to be. The problem, nonetheless, is that reality contains, or rather is, not just the negation of what it is but also the indeterminacy of what *is* and *ought to be*.

The peculiarity of Hegelian language is not only the terminological coincidence with psychoanalysis but also how it borders on its limits. Unlike Kant, who recognizes in freedom and contentment the speculative purpose of transformation as a mediation of the tendency towards the best, Hegel is especially cautious and lucid in introducing into this same mediation the indeterminacy of the drive of perfectibility as a critique of all anticipation. That is, it is not that the drive does not manifest itself in a concrete and determined way, but that the drive itself is a force propelled towards freedom, recognizing that we cannot determine in advance the form

⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. by K.M. Michel and E. Moldenhauer, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1970 (henceforth cited as TW, followed by the number of the respective volume), vol. 12, pp. 74-75. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Spanish, French and German in this paper are ours.

and expression freedom and reaction will take. For this reason, Hegel can insist that perfectibility is as indeterminate as *Veränderlichkeit* itself, «it lacks end and purpose, as well as any measure for change [*sie ist ohne Zweck und Ziel wie ohne Maßstab für die Veränderung*]»: What is best, Hegel concludes, «is something completely undetermined [*ist ein ganz Unbestimmtes*]»⁸.

Temptation lies obviously in giving a specific time and space to perfectibility, to situate it in a here-and-now that circumscribes senses in an anticipatory, idealistic, prospective, idyllic, utopian perspective; however, the subtext here is subtly more radical for it is not a question of projection – whose realization is never guaranteed – but of the simple recognition of the driven force of transformation that, as an immanent principle, does not express an enhancement but the drastic awareness of the possibility of error (and horror, we could add) in the principles of transformation as such. Development in nature and in teleological history «makes itself immediately, non-contradictorily and without obstacles», but in social, spiritual life, says Hegel, «it is mediated by consciousness and will», although «these are initially immersed in their immediate natural life». If in nature «development is a quiet emergence», in social life it is «an arduous and endless battle against itself [*ein harter unendlicher Kampf gegen sich selbst*]»; but then comes an act of precision over language, and now we are facing «an arduous and involuntary work against itself [*(eine) harte unwillige Arbeit gegen sich selbst*]»⁹. Thus «spirit begins with its infinite possibility, but only as possibility»¹⁰, for fighting and waging war belong to a different realm of reality than that of *working against itself*. In other words, *Veränderungsfähigkeit* is a faculty that expresses the drive of the infinite possibility of the spirit that narrates its realization on the stage of universal history – including the possibilities of our own (and of others') errors and horrors, so the natural *it-self* becomes a social and subjective

⁸ TW 12, p. 75. Of course, we cannot ignore the contextual character of Hegelian categories. Regarding the notion of *Bestimmungslosigkeit* in the narrative context of the logical process, Cf. TW 6, p. 36; TW 9, § 86z.

⁹ Ivi, p. 76.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 78.

one-self, and the indeterminacy of *pure* logic becomes the indeterminacy of history.

These brief paragraphs of the introduction to the lectures, paragraphs beautifully written, could be interpreted as a kind of unfinished warning in the Hegelian narrative, and as a possible criterion for potential narratives of a unfixed work (in the sense of *Arbeit*) against oneself. When Jean Copjec takes up the Freudian distinction to interpret the place of Antigone, she uses the concept of *Haftbarkeit* as a linguistic resource to refer to the responsibility that not only opposes and confronts, but that in its public gestures forces the expression of the *Fixierarbeit* that Creon's voice-as-law performs. As a narrative, *Haftbarkeit* not only operates as a resistance to the temptation of institutional political *Fixierarbeit*, but it circumscribes the concrete materials of the production of an archive assembled with previously existing documentation (stories, tales, symbols, images, etc.). Why? Because the work that social life carries out against itself unsettles the center of the fixation of the law, and thus shows the arbitrariness and the surplus-violence that organize modern societies. In this sense *Haftbarkeit* produces an arrhythmia and a momentary suspension of what Hegel called *Zufälligkeit*, the randomness of open and concrete possibility – irreducible to a pure and abstract universal possibility.

Disruption does not occur in a place, but rather produces its placement. The precision that de Beauvoir proposes in *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* points to this nuance, «we must not confuse the notion of ambiguity with that of absurdity. To declare existence absurd is to deny that it can give itself a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to posit that its meaning is never fixed»¹¹. Ambiguity appeals to the same dimension as *Haftbarkeit* does, where meaning is disrupted from time to time with a concrete succession of critical moments. Those instances do not necessarily constitute dramatic or exceptional moments, but rather the inherent tension of everyday

¹¹ S. de Beauvoir, *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, Paris, Gallimard, 1947, p. 180. On the notion of fixity: A. Narváez and F. Medina, *After Hegel: A Postmodern Genealogy of Historical Fiction*, «Philosophy and Society», XXV (2), 2024, pp. 299-316.

life where *Haftbarkeit*, which Lacan associates with commitment, responsibility and obstinacy regarding *others*, also translates a symbolic suspension within fixed narratives¹². *Haftbarkeit* can then be read as a kind of drive that inscribes a radical *malgré tout* in the midst of what appears to be the tyranny of impossibility and *Fixierarbeit*, and as a potential unfixing relation with reality¹³.

Is it possible, then, to trace a genealogy of emancipatory narratives that can be read between the lines of the official revolutionary framework in the typically French bourgeois worldview, dominated by the Rousseau debate and the *Lumières-Aufklärung* dialogue?¹⁴

¹² Cfr. J. Copjec, *La tombe de la persévérance: à propos d'Antigone*, «Savoirs et Clinique», I (1), 2002, pp. 97-102.

¹³ Regardless of Copjec's use of the term, which we follow here, Freud's concept of *Fixieren*- also has a sense referring to the establishment of a historical record, for example in *Moses and Monotheism*. In *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, *Fixierung* also appeals to the ambiguity of the conscious/unconscious record of psychic processes, just as in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. What this double dimension suggests is that even in a fixation context, what is fixed is never totally closed, even though *it appears* as such in the formation of psychic experience, so that the effectiveness of the fixation is itself a fixation. This doubling does not suppose a regression to infinity, but rather the recognition of the need for supposition, which, far from constituting a spurious language, constitutes the need for the pre-supposition of representations. That fixations can be verbalized as such does not mean, therefore, that mere verbalization (for example, denunciation) supposes a sufficient criterion for subverting the force of the fixation, and for this reason psychoanalytic work is expressed precisely as working *against* oneself, and therefore as a reinscription of experience.

¹⁴ Cfr. C. Piau-Gillot, *Le discours de Jean-Jacques Rousseau sur les femmes, et sa réception critique*, «Dix-Huitième Siècle», XIII, 1981, pp. 317-333; A. Knüfer, *À quoi bon lire Rousseau en féministe?*, «Nouvelles Questions Féministes», XXXIX (2), 2020, pp. 107-122; H. von Felden, *Geschlechterkonstruktion und Frauenbildung im 18. Jahrhundert: Jean-Jacques Rousseau und die zeitgenössische Rezeption in Deutschland*, in *Handbuch zur Frauenbildung*, ed. by W. Gieseke, Wisenbalden, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2001, pp. 25-34; H. von Helten, *Die Frauen und Rousseau: Die Rousseau-Rezeption zeitgenössischer Schriftstellerinnen in Deutschland*, Frankfurt am Main, Campe, 1997.

The opacities of Montesquieu, the reflections of Mme. Lambert and Mme. D'Epinay, as well as the classic documents of Condorcet, constitute a sort of common basis for the discussion on education and the political rights of women. Alongside these classic documents, there are several archives of the parallel discussions on enlightened feminism, riddled with its contradictions and contractions; that is, shaped by its trajectories of radicalization, inscription, and rewriting, with its multiple symbolism that has at its base the immediate political inscription of the claims for subsistence, with all the derivations that provide an increase in consciousness «in turn fostered by the unforeseen actions that women carry out in the scenarios of power»¹⁵. Those writing trajectories that question the masculinization of the long revolutionary process – not only through the criticism of the arbitrariness of the law, but also through the disruption stated in the fiction of universality – involve a rereading of the documents that assemble the reference frameworks of the Revolution.

When Alenka Zupančič argues that Antigone symbolically represents «an interior excluded from the rule of law», she opens a linguistic dimension that allows her to reinterpret the play, and also the category of hysteria. According to Zupančič, «Antigone's singular fate embodies a structural impasse in the symbolic order – the impasse that comes to light, particularly at moments of crisis, and requires a restructuring of the symbolic order. More precisely, Antigone does not embody this structural impasse but, rather, the excess that it inevitably produces. She is a subjective figure of this excess that shatters its ruthless objective accumulation». Antigone «is 'hysterical' in its essence. It aims not at uniqueness, or at personal rights, but at what is broken in the state of things, in the order of things. Freud saw this very clearly». Hysteria in this sense is never just a singular problem, but a problem of a certain structuring of power and social links, and «although it is true that the hysteric is usually part of the configuration she criticizes, it is also true that hers is the subjective position that makes this problem perceptible and

¹⁵ J. Sazbón, *Cuatro mujeres en la Revolución Francesa*, Buenos Aires, Biblos, 2007, p. 42, p. 19.

impossible to ignore»¹⁶, or so to speak, a radical and fundamental *Veränderungsfähigkeit*.

This excess or surplus of language acts as an informal translator of the patriarchal, colonial and racial character of modernity, an impugment of the revolution of the *Liberté* (of whites), *Égalité* (of property owners) and *Fraternité* (of men). What makes this excess of language unprocessable is that reveals the rational unconstitutionality of the political constitution. What most simply expresses the reaction against excess is of course prohibition, which in a context of tension between temporalities has little to do with the romantic idealization of the nature of women and is rather inscribed in the World History and the dictum of the law – of force, and of the law of force. When the National Convention, «after having heard its Committee of General Security, decrees the following: That women's clubs and popular societies, under whatever name, are prohibited»¹⁷, specially to outlaw the Parisian Society of Republican-Revolutionary Citizens of 1793 (the popular *excess* of the

¹⁶ A. Zupančič, *Let Them Rot*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2023, p. 83.

¹⁷ J.-P.-A. Amzar, *Séance du 9 de Brumaire de la Convention nationale*, «Le Moniteur universel», XVIII (40), 1793, p. 164. This is the tone of Jean-Pierre-André Amar's speech before the proscription: «Several statements reported to your Committee prove that this movement can only be attributed to a plot hatched by the enemies of public affairs; several of these women calling themselves revolutionaries may have been led astray by an excess of patriotism, but others, no doubt, were led only by malice. [...] that it [the Section] believes that some malicious people have taken on the mask of exaggerated patriotism to excite a sectional movement and a kind of counter-revolution in Paris. The Section demands that it be forbidden to hinder anyone in the freedom of costumes and that popular women's societies be strictly prohibited, at least during the revolution. [...] 1° Can women exercise political rights and take an active part in government affairs? 2° Can they deliberate when gathered in political associations or popular societies? On these two questions, the Committee has decided in the negative. [...] The political rights of citizens are to discuss and to have resolutions made concerning the interests of the State by comparative deliberations and to resist oppression. Do women have the moral and physical strength required for the exercise of either of these rights? The universal opinion rejects this idea».

enlightened worldview), also narrates a symbolic and material continuity with the voice-of-law of Creon («I will not be ruled by a woman», «there must be no surrender to a woman. No! If we fall, better a man should take us down»)¹⁸, willing to suppress society itself rather than accept an ambiguous and unfixed drive of *Veränderungsfähigkeit* within the Revolution. That is the scenario where emerge unfixed writings such as the *Cahiers de doléances*, anonymous popular speeches, interventions-interruptions at the Assembly and the Convention, the *Délibérations des Dames Citoyennes du district de Saint Martin*, denunciations and speeches of Théroigne de Méricourt, Pauline Léon, Etta Palm, Claire Lacombe, Marie Martin, and a long etcetera that subsists along with the philosophical and literary narratives of de Duras, de Staël and de Gouges as expressions of those excesses at the core of the masculinization of politics as a concrete form of *Fixierarbeit* during the long revolutionary process.

Claire de Coëtnempren de Kersaint, Mme. de Duras, wrote *Ourika* in 1821, attempting a style of writing that brought together literary motifs that were rarely seen held together at the time, such as the leading role of women, colonialism, slavery, reproductive rights, and sexual dissidence, an aspect that reappears in *Olivier ou le Secret*, an unpublished novel from 1823 that deals with male homosexuality, sexual impotence, and androgyny. The latter was plagiarized as a form of parody in 1826 by Henri de Latouche, editor of the *Mercur de France*, without any acknowledgment to the original author (Latouche later returned to the argument in *Fragoletta. Naples et Paris in 1799*). Although de Dura's influence has been discussed, denied, and defended, it is true that as a literary motif, the androgyny that she proposed, had a pact recognizaimble in Stendhal's *L'Armance* and in Astolphe de Custine's *Aloys ou le Religieux du mont Saint-Bernard*. However, it must also be noted that the topic has an obvious antecedent in *Les enfants de Sodome à l'assemblée nationale ou Députation de l'Ordre de la Manchette* of 1790 and other documents of the revolutionary period, such as *Les*

¹⁸ Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. by P. Woodruff, Indianapolis, Hackett, 2001, vv. 525, 678-679.

Confédérés Véroles, *La Calotte Renversée*, and *Les Fredaines Lubrique*¹⁹.

The impact of de Duras's works is reflected in her confidant, François-René de Chateaubriand («I'm very moved by *Ourika*»), and in the admiration it aroused in Goethe and Humboldt,²⁰ in the proliferation of theatrical productions during the 1820s, and its subsequent reception and uses in the history of French and Francophone literature²¹. What interests us about de Duras's writing here is that despite explicitly narrating a revolutionary breakthrough, it expresses the social, economic, and political transformation of the *fin de siècle*, inscribing it both in the history of literature and in the wider trajectory of criticism generally absent in formal and official representations of the period. Or, to put it in other words, what is paradigmatic in de Duras's writing is not the motif («women») but the place of enunciation and the significant trajectory of the production of a different narrative context.

When de Duras published *Ourika*, the slave trade was formally prohibited, although Napoleon had reinstated slavery as a reactionary answer to the Haitian revolution, to which de Duras herself replies with stern detachment: «The massacres of Saint-Domingue caused me a new and heart-rending pain: Until then I had been distressed at belonging to a proscribed race; now I was ashamed of

¹⁹ Cfr. T. Pastorello, *La sodomie masculine dans les pamphlets révolutionnaires*, «Annales historiques de la Révolution française», CCCLXI, 2010, pp. 91-130 and Id., *Sodome in Paris: protohistoire de l'homosexualité masculine end XVIIIe - milieu XIXe siècle*, Thèse en vue de l'obtention du Doctorat d'histoire, Université Paris Diderot (Paris VII), 2008.

²⁰ Cfr. M.-B. Diethelm, *Goethe et Claire de Duras*, «Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France», CXVI (3), 2016, pp. 705-721; B. Degout, *Madame de Duras et Chateaubriand. Temps cycliques et temps de la politique*, «Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France», CXVI (3), 2016, pp. 725-730.

²¹ For example, in Flaubert, Hugo, Balzac, and Césaire. Cfr. J.-F. Pottier, *Claire de Duras (1777-1828), écrivaine*, «Mémoires de l'Académie des Sciences, Artes et Belles-Lettres de Touraine», XXVII, 2014, pp. 157-181. Also C. Achour, *Racisme, lactification, exclusion : Ourika de Madame de Duras, 1823*, «Diacritik. Le magazine qui met l'accent sur la culture», 6 février 2017.

belonging to a race of barbarians and murderers»²². De Duras's position in this respect does not differ at first from the commonplaces of Franco-German literature, especially from the symbolic production unleashed by Heinrich von Kleist's *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo*, and the racialized critique of the «madness of [black] freedom»²³. At the same time, it neither differs from nor inaugurates the voice of the African diaspora, both because French literature had already tried out this theme, for example in Victor Hugo's first novel, *Bug-Jargal*, and because Henri Grégoire's *De la littérature des nègres* had also produced a kind of common framework for the reception of the African-Caribbean diaspora's writing in France. The radical nature of de Duras's critical gesture lies in another aspect: A form and style of verbalizing that does not answer a question (as Grégoire does, «but is not the [aesthetic] energy of this inclination an indisputable sign of talent? [...] Will the surprise be less at the announcement of works composed by Negroes and Mulattoes?»²⁴), but that formulates it as an insinuation. Thus, when Ourika the Senegalese listens to Mme. B. from behind the draperies – as an involuntary intrusion, an involuntary work of listening – who says, «I love her as if she were my daughter; I would do anything to make her happy, [however] poor Ourika! I see her alone, forever alone in life!», de Duras strikes a different tone: «It would be impossible for me to describe to you the effect that these few

²² C. de Duras, *Ourika*, Paris, Impr. Royale, 1823, p. 47.

²³ H. von Kleist, *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo*, ed. by M. Leis, Ditzingen, Reclam, 2017, p. 14. The temporality of criticism differs in this sense from the temporality of power, just as the temporality of writing differs from and strains that of writing. A concrete example of this inter- and intratemporal dialogue is Priscilla Layne's reading of the rewriting of Kleist's novel that Necati Öziri published in 2019, and which Sebastian Nübling subsequently staged at the Gorki Theatre in Berlin, incorporating into the story the gesticulation and movement of African and Caribbean carnivals, diluting Kleist's fixed representation of the Haitian emancipatory history. Cfr. P. Layne, *A Feminist Rewriting of Kleist? Öziri's and Nübling's Die Verlobung in St. Domingo – Ein Widerspruch*, «Critical Stages/Scènes critiques», XXVII, 2023.

²⁴ H. Grégoire, *De la littérature des nègres*, Paris, Maradin, 1808, pp. 185-186.

words produced in me», Ourika says, and «I saw everything, I saw myself as a black woman [*négresse*]»²⁵. The subsequent arrangement of the argument transcribes and translates the irrevocable place of racialization there, of its critique, and of the place it produces in the netting of contradictions of the French bourgeoisie – both in the denunciation and in writing.

Something similar can be said of Anne-Louise Germaine Necker, Mme. de Staël, Claire de Duras's personal and literary confidant. Daughter of Suzanne Curchod and Jacques Necker, Louis XVI's minister, de Staël is a paradigmatic case alternative to that of the masculinization of the historical account of classical German philosophy in France, which has constructed its narrative primarily from the works of Victor Cousin; however, it was with the publication of *De l'Allemagne* in London in 1813, and its subsequent reissue in 1839, that the French enlightened bourgeoisie was first confronted with a systematic account of German classical culture, literature and philosophy as an autonomous expression of the Lumières on the other side of the Rhine. In her extensive essay, de Staël proposes a general interpretation of the logical consistency of the three Kantian critiques, followed by a critique of the appropriation and reduction of the Kantian argument in the philosophies of Fichte and Schelling, while defending the way in which Schiller would have applied Kantian theory to literature, not only as a theory but also as a form of writing. This last aspect is particularly relevant, because it partly anticipates the argument of *De l'esprit des traductions*, where de Staël interprets writing and translation as a gesture of responsibility that expresses an idea of universal sensibility: «Now, it is to the universal that we must tend, when we wish to do good to men. I will say more: Even if we understood foreign languages well, we could still enjoy, through a well-made translation into our own language, a more familiar and more intimate pleasure»²⁶. The intimacy of writing and the style's familiarity, traditionally neglected by virtue of the aridity of scientific writing and its severe difficulty

²⁵ De Duras, *Ourika*, p. 26.

²⁶ G. de Staël, *De l'esprit des traductions*, in *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Treuttel et Würtzvol, 1820-1821, vol. 17, p. 388.

expresses the humanistic value that de Staël gives to expression itself: «The breadth of knowledge brings before our eyes so many different ways of seeing that it gives the mind the tolerance that is born of universality»²⁷. For that reason, «[n]evertheless, we must give Kant the justice he deserves even as a writer, when he renounces his scientific language», i. e., to the language of metaphysics, «[i]n speaking of the arts, and especially of morality, his style is almost always perfectly clear, energetic and simple. How admirable his doctrine then appears! How it expresses the feeling of beauty and the love of duty!»²⁸. De Staël's critical gesture then supposes an endogenous criterion of philosophical narrative that is identified with the exercise of writing – a critical gesture that poetry, theatre and literature never obliterate despite being upheld in Germany by the same claim to universality²⁹.

Here, the sense of universality is also a kind of leitmotif in the histories of classical German philosophy that oscillates between the criteria of criticism and disruption with the metaphysical past; however, the criterion that de Staël proposes, as a «summary of all my work»³⁰ is enthusiasm as «the truly distinctive quality of the German nation», because «[w]e can judge the influence he exerts on the enlightenment from the progress of the human spirit in Germany». So, for de Staël it is enthusiasm itself that «brings to mind the system», rather than reason alone, although «it doesn't resemble fanaticism in any way». Even more, «reason does not give happiness in place of what it takes away, enthusiasm finds in the reverie of the heart and in the understanding of thought what fanaticism and passion contain in a single idea or in a single object». So, «this feeling is, by its very universality, very favorable to thought and imagination»³¹. This criterion, enthusiasm, is of course not only the key to interpreting German philosophy, to its translation into French narratives, but also an approach to lucidity and

²⁷ Ead., *De l'Allemagne*, Paris, J.J. Paschoud, 1814, vol. 1, p. 129.

²⁸ Ivi, vol. 3, p. 89.

²⁹ Ivi, vol. 3, pp. 52, 135.

³⁰ Ivi, vol. 3, p. 362.

³¹ Ivi, vol. 3, pp. 362-364.

cleverness in writing as a critical language and not only as an informative medium. For de Staël writing is an inseparable aspect of style and motive, just as expression is for art. A notable example of the work of writing is how de Staël describes German women: If at first, in an abstractly, formally universal and Rousseauian way we could say women appear as a social and natural predisposition to the service others, then it is the interpretation of universality that nuances this place. Thus,

[n]ature and society give women a great habit of suffering, and it cannot be denied, it seems to me, that in our day they are generally worth more than men. In an age where the universal evil is selfishness, men, to whom all positive interests relate, must have less generosity, less sensitivity than women; they hold on to life only by the ties of the heart, and when they go astray, it is still by a feeling that they are drawn away: Their personality is always twofold, while that of man has only himself for its goal. Homage is paid to them by the affections they inspire, but those they grant are almost always sacrifices. The most beautiful of virtues, devotion, is their enjoyment and their destiny; no happiness can exist for them except through the reflection of the glory and prosperity of another: Finally, living outside oneself, whether through ideas, or through feelings, or especially through virtues, gives the soul a habitual feeling of elevation³².

Mme. de Staël's argument visibly expresses the Rousseauian sensibility, so close to the temporal displacement proposed by Pierre-Ambroise Choderlos de Laclos, according to whom women are destined to characterize the best of humanity through education, but outside of this historical time:

Come and learn how, born companions of man, you became his slave; how, having fallen into this abject state, you came to enjoy it, to regard it as your natural state [...] But if at the story of your misfortunes and your losses, you blush with shame and anger, if tears of indignation escape from your eyes, if you burn with the noble desire to regain your advantages, to return to the fullness of your being, do not let

³² Ivi, vol. 1, p. 32.

yourselves be deceived any longer by deceptive promises, do not wait for help from the men who are the authors of your misfortunes: They have neither the will nor the power to end them, and how could they want to form women before whom they would be forced to blush; learn that one can only escape from slavery by a great revolution. Is this revolution possible? [...] I am silent on this question; but until it has come, and so long as men are settling your fate, I shall be permitted to say, and it will be easy for me to prove, that there is no means of improving the education of women³³.

In Rousseau's sexualized version of social decadence, Laclos displaces the trajectory of emancipation because while he announces the rhetoric of possibility, he also enunciates the impossibility of morality and education under conditions of slavery: What Laclos ultimately offers is the postponement/displacement of possibility subsumed by impossibility. Here, de Staël's writing introduces a divergent temporality because while «the destiny of women always remains the same, it is their soul alone that makes it, political circumstances have no influence on it», and «when men do not know how, or cannot use their lives worthily and nobly, nature takes revenge on them for the very gifts they have received from it; the activity of the body serves only the laziness of the mind, the strength of the soul becomes rudeness»; meanwhile, «women cultivate their minds, and feeling and reverie preserve in their souls the image of all that is noble and beautiful». Now, as she said about German romanticism – German idealism was not a notion at the time – reverie is not a subordinate sentiment but a translation of universality by itself. That is why the negation of reverie could be read as the racialized cultural imposition over Ourika.

At first the argument seems conservative, even immobilizing, but it is necessary to specify how it fits into the writing of a critical temporality, precisely despite its own contradictions: «The feudal system, that sad and severe political institution, but which consolidated, in some respects, the spirit of chivalry by transforming it into laws, the feudal system, I say, has been maintained in Germany until our days: It was destroyed in France by Cardinal Richelieu, and,

³³ P.C. de Laclos, *De l'éducation des femmes*, Paris, Léon Vanier, 1903, p. 14.

from that time until the Revolution, the French have completely lacked a source of enthusiasm», replacing that source with «the spirit of conceit», and for that same reason «France was then without any kind of enthusiasm; and as nations need some to avoid becoming corrupted and dissolved, it was undoubtedly this natural need which turned, from the middle of the last century, all minds towards the love of liberty»³⁴. And so de Staël concludes:

France was called the paradise of women, because they enjoyed great freedom there; but this freedom itself came from the ease with which one could detach oneself from them. The Turk who locks up his wife, proves to her at least by this that she is necessary to his happiness: The man of good fortune, such as the last century has furnished us with so many examples, chooses women as victims of his vanity; and this vanity does not consist only in seducing them, but in abandoning them. He must be able to indicate with light and unassailable words in themselves, that such a woman loved him and that he no longer cares about her. My self-esteem cries out to me: Make her die of grief, said a friend of the Baron de Bezenval, and this friend seemed very regretful to him, when a premature death prevented him from following this fine plan. 'We get tired of everything, my angel', writes M. de La Clos, in a novel that makes us shudder with the refinements of immorality that it reveals. Finally, in those times when it was claimed that love reigned in France, it seems to me that gallantry put women, so to speak, outside the law. When their reign of a moment had passed, there was for them neither generosity, nor gratitude, nor even pity. The accents of love were counterfeited to make them fall into the trap, like the crocodile that imitates the voices of children to attract their mothers³⁵.

What is then the subtext of de Staël's restorative denunciation inscribed in the critical narrative of the absence of all enthusiasm? We can here suppose the invariability of the place of women outside the law after the Revolution and its announcement as a horizon of realization of freedom. In this sense, de Staël's interpretation of

³⁴ De Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, vol. 1, p. 37.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 39.

enthusiasm, and the postponement of the universality of the law, are inscribed in the larger narrative context of Olympe de Gouges' *Déclaration* as a critique of the masculinization of the Revolution: «Man alone has made up a principle of this exception. Bizarre, blind, bloated with science and degenerate, in this century of enlightenment and sagacity, in the most crass ignorance, he wants to command as a despot over a sex that has received all the intellectual faculties; he claims to enjoy the Revolution, and to claim his rights to equality, to say nothing more»³⁶. And later on:

Woman, wake up; the tocsin of reason is heard throughout the universe; recognize your rights. The powerful empire of nature is no longer surrounded by prejudice, fanaticism, superstition and lies. The torch of truth has dissipated all the clouds of stupidity and usurpation. The slave man has multiplied his forces, has needed to resort to yours to break his chains. Having become free, he has become unjust to his companion. O women! Women, when will you cease to be blind? What are the advantages that you have reaped in the revolution? A more marked contempt, a more signal disdain. In the centuries of corruption you have reigned only over the weakness of men. Your empire is destroyed; what is left to you then? The conviction of the injustices of man³⁷.

Olympe de Gouges's *Déclaration* is an exemplary case not only because her writing brings together two positions at first contradictory – namely, the critique of the universality of masculine law and the defense of the monarchy as a principle of government – but also because of the reception of the critique/defense as documents of unfixed narratives that unfix the system of references of the *Fixierarbeit* of history and freedom. This caution is important to specify the textual scope of the *Déclaration* without reducing de Gouges' writing to a mere indecision determined by the political realism of language in the public space. Accordingly, de Gouges' feminist writing questions the limits of women's realization as

³⁶ O. de Gouges, *Les Droits de la femme. À la reine [Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne]*, «Les Cahiers du CEDREF», II, 1996, p. 286.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

political subjects, inquiring the distinction between the public and the private, and the active and passive principle as an original hierarchical division between the masculine and the feminine. As Joan W. Scott says, «the attempt to achieve this project involved an act of self-creation, in which a woman defining herself as woman enacted the public/political role usually performed by men»³⁸. In this sense, to interpret the *Déclaration* exclusively on the basis of the postscript, where de Gouges declares that she feels afflicted by the fate of the king and calls La Fayette «a Dieu», not only does not make justice to the text but subordinates the emancipatory writing to the Girondin temporality of the document. Or to put it in another way, it is not so much against as despite the postscript of the *Déclaration* that the writing is inscribed in the narrative of the *Manifeste des Enragés*, the feminist radicalization of the *sansculotterie*, and the Haitian revolution – that is to say, three of the popular unfixed driven *Veränderungsfähigkeiten* within and despite the Revolution – but precisely because of those writings as forms of expression that exceed the formal translation of unfixed narratives. The construction of these narratives, as by de Staël's and de Gouges's, is not only about producing one's own stories, but also about producing a history that inscribes the existing documents in a material and symbolic archive without anticipatory principles, completely open to the interpretation (and dispute) of the emancipatory experience – including that of the somehow non-intuitive practices and discourses such as French realism. It would be perfectly possible to criticize *Ourika* for interpreting the enunciation, «I saw myself as a black woman», in a purely negative way without any subsequent edifying narration of

³⁸ J.W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 33. Or, as Gisela Thiele-Knobloch says: «In 1793, Robespierre declared that all men were brothers and thus internationally equal. Schiller, the guest of honor of the French revolutionaries, transformed this principle into 'All men were brothers' in the Ode to Joy. Beethoven gave it a symphonic, luxuriant form in the Ninth Symphony also to the delight of all women, who evidently also felt included». G. Thiele-Knobloch, *Olympe de Gouges – oder Menschenrecht auch für Frauen?*, Berlin, Zentrale Universitätsdruckerei der Freien Universität Berlin, 1989, p. 5.

identity. Now, the concrete principle of a *Haftbarkeit* of emancipatory processes is that de Duras did not have to do so, precisely because this transmission of a universal (or, rather, total) responsibility transforms *Haftbarkeit* into a *Fixierarbeit*, or transform responsibility into obligation, and therefore into a criterion of universal anticipation of the meaning of experience. To *tell* the indeterminacy negated by the fixity of political and philosophical languages is already a form of actual critique, traditionally neglected under the *a priori* supposed accuracy of scientific logic (formal, dialectical, and so). The interest that de Staël places in the form of philosophical discourse as an indispensable means of argumentation is a fundamental expression of this dimension of history relative to the production of unfixed narratives. This possibility suggests a different montage that snatches discourses, styles, histories, and symbols from the institutional logic of the fixed devices of modernity – the patriarchal, racial, and colonial devices of capitalism – and disarranges the natural history of development as quiet emergence, as Hegel said, and reclaims, reinterprets, and reinscribes unfixed experiences within the trajectory of possibility. This awareness, or more precisely this narrative attitude, is what Derrida highlights when he argues that «we have to be very cautious with neutrality and neutralization», and even more so with «universality as neutralization»³⁹.

What the indeterminacy of freedom brings to the table is not the complete incapacity, the impotence of freedom, but precisely its potentiality as a concretion that produces a narrative against its own fixed place in history and that, in its process of realization, unbalances the place of enunciation and thus the symbolic language that represents and stages the narrative: If we can speak not only of working against oneself, then we can also think of a reconfiguration of universality from and in spite of actually existing reality and reimagine unfixed narratives. To reclaim the sense of reality from the claim to universality of any natural history of society, to delineate its historical residues, and to narrate the history of the symbolic and

³⁹ J. Derrida, *Women in the Beehive: A Seminar with Jacques Derrida*, «Differences», XVI (3), 2005, p. 146.

material production is already a critical dimension of language and the experience of reality. Against a pessimistic formulation of the critical attitude, we argue that this disruption already *takes place* within the threads of fixed modernity, in everyday life as forms of poetics and politics, and in writing as the *Haftbarkeit* of life – as indeterminacy, as ambiguity and as the radical search for endless possibilities.